

HYSTERIA IN SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE



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The master/hysteric couple is found throughout history, but in this chapter I will try to elucidate its current configuration. That requires, first of all, something like a diagnosis of the present state of the discourses.

HYSTORY

Hysteria bears some of the responsibility “hystorically” for this present state. Indeed, hysteria is “the unconscious in action” and did not just begin to insist in history recently, because the unconscious is based on the fact that we speak. Hysterical subjects are not the only ones to lend their voices to it, of course, but more than others they keep the leitmotif alive. The efficacy of this insistence is the origin of the desire that gave rise to science. At least, that is the thesis that Lacan develops in Seminar XVII and in “Radiophonie.”¹ This thesis leaves no room for the Hegelian master/slave dialectic and makes science a pointed response to hysteria’s provocation: this runs from Socrates to Newton and from Anna O. to Freud. The master’s discourse “finds its reason in the hysteric’s discourse,” says Lacan. Antiquity’s master relied on the slave’s artisanal knowledge in order to produce a surplus jouissance that plugged up the sexual gap—at the cost of any and all desire to know. It took Socrates, the pure hysteric, to breathe into it the desire to know from which science issued, involving the transformation of knowledge by science from artisanal knowledge to universalizable, formalized knowledge in which mathematics dominates.

What kind of success is this for the hysteric? This resurgence of desire produces new knowledge that operates in the real, but it nevertheless leaves the subject who is confronted with the sexual impasse suffering; for, even more

than Antiquity's discourse, science excludes the subject from its purview: "Science is an ideology of the suppression of the subject." It is not surprising, then, that postscientific hysteria reemerged at another point in history as a symptom against the backdrop of the failure of the Enlightenment, and that the result was the emergence of psychoanalysis by which Freud objected to medicine's foreclosure of the subject. The question, therefore, is what has become of hysteria now that psychoanalysis has emerged in science, 100 years after Freud accepted the challenge to take responsibility, both practically and theoretically, for its solicitation, having managed to inscribe the enclave of his practice in the regulation of *jouissance* by the dominant discourse. It is thus hysteria in science, but with psychoanalysis, that I am investigating.

REPERCUSSIONS OF SCIENCE

Over thirty years ago, Lacan highlighted the fact that the repercussions of science in our world appear in social links due to universalization. This is now widely recognized and most often deplored. It goes hand in hand with the new supremacy of the goods produced by the modern economic system in subjects' lives, and a question arises about the extent to which it is the effect thereof. Whatever the case may be, this twofold result—universalization and the supremacy of goods—concerns the sexual couple, which is precisely what fascinates the hysteric.

The mortification that language brings with it has now shifted into reality—the reality of instruments. The latter instrumentalize us to such an extent that we are not even aware of it in our everyday lives, and it takes some accident or science fiction story to remind us of it. Our lives, which we attribute to our bodies, are now totally fitted out with gadgets. Lacan also noted at the end of his teaching that to have a body is to be able to do something with it, notably to use it for *jouissance*. This can take many forms: a body can be lent, sold, offered, refused, and so on. In capitalist discourse, something new has appeared: our bodies are now pledged to the enormous machine of production.

The phenomenon is not in itself new, but its mass application is, extending far beyond the proletariat to which Marx confined it. At all levels of social employment, our already instrumentalized bodies have themselves become instruments. It is obvious that we treat our bodies as we treat machines: we give them checkups, special diets, fitness training, beauty care, and so on. Not all of this can be chalked up to narcissism. In fact, we take the durability of the equipment (the body) into account—indeed, the health bulletins about our leaders have no other meaning. Why would Yeltsin, speaking on French television in the 1990s, feel compelled to tell us about his cold shower in the morning, his favorite sport, and how much sleep he gets if not to reassure us about his instrument's ability to continue to man the helm? The body is now a form of capital for all of us, and we treat it as such.

How could this not be detrimental to *jouissance* when the very definition of capital is that it is exempt from *jouissance*?² Love loses here, to be sure. Courtly love, for example, and *la carte du tendre*³—requiring patience and industry—were only for people who were idle, who had no date books or answering machines! Can you imagine a troubadour with a fax machine? While family ties have become independent from the transmission of goods, love itself is increasingly expressed in terms of having: we count its occurrences, its product, and its gains; we calculate profits and losses, and our legislation ratifies this. In this way, the capitalization of the body goes hand in hand with a widespread debasement—not merely neurotic—in the sphere of love.⁴

This new realism is accompanied by a still more remarkable effect—previously unheard of—that I will call “the unisex effect,” generalizing the expression that advertisers usually apply to clothes, clothes that usually conceal rather than reveal sexual difference. It is often thought that we are moving toward a generalized transvestitism in the name of the equality of men and women. This is perhaps true, but it is an inexorable side effect of universalization: science’s correlate is the Cartesian subject who knows nothing of sexual difference; science consequently adapts very easily to the reduction of every subject to a universal worker. The immediate result is especially felt by women, who for centuries have seen their *jouissance* confined to the perimeter of the home, whatever form that home may have taken, including husband and child. The labor market has emancipated them from this confined field, while also alienating them through the imperatives of production. Hence the hesitations of the feminist movement when it oscillates between a claim for equality and a contrary claim for difference in which the “particularity protest” is expressed.

What is clear is that there is virtually no domain to which women do not now have access. Their ingress keeps expanding, and the tide seems irreversible. Marguerite Yourcenar has succeeded where Marie Curie failed, obtaining entry into the Académie Française. The following have recently been announced: the first woman driver in a Formula One race car, the first woman to climb a difficult mountain alone, and the first girl in a chess championship. A few bastions still remain. A woman’s attempt to be admitted into the French National Guard recently led to considerable protest by its members. That may still take some time! The psychoanalyst, as analyst, need not take a position on such developments. He or she cannot, however, ignore their consequences . . . on both sexes.

How can the subjective impact of these social changes be understood? They concern phallic *jouissance* itself, insofar as it is not only inscribed within the context of the sexual relationship, but also props up the whole relationship to reality. Phallic *jouissance* is *jouissance* that can be capitalized upon. Unisex⁵ means the phallic *jouissance* that is available to everyone. Not that women were ever deprived of it, but they had it only within the confines of their roles as wives and mothers. It is this restriction, not to say prohibition, that has given way, allowing for widespread competition between the sexes.

The historical moment at which Freud emphasized the phallic phase—that scandalous notion implying an inequality of the sexes in the unconscious—was not indifferent. The context of his discovery was the ideology of human rights and the ideals of distributive justice which, in the realm of ethics, echo the universality of the subject of science. We must agree with Freud and everyone else around us—they are all on the same side on this point—that boys and girls are not born “free and equal in rights.” Thanks to discourse, boys begin life with a little more capital: having the phallic signifier. It is only logical then that girls feel poor and consequently dream—this is all that Freud discovered in exploring the feminine unconscious—of obtaining something. There was a time when it could only be from a husband, bearer of the organ, and then from children as substitutes. Today, alongside these engaging realities, the whole field of what Lacan calls “the most actual realizations” is open to them: goods, knowledge, power, and so on.

Our scientific civilization has changed women’s reality. The analyst is cognizant of this and observes that it does not necessarily make them any happier: anxiety, inhibition, guilt, and feelings of failure are among its consequences. The first psychoanalysts, Joan Riviere in particular, assumed that if, at times, women felt precluded from phallic jouissance, it was because they feared losing their femininity in it. But is it not true, rather, that phallic jouissance in itself engenders guilt—for men as well, although in different forms? Since it is a limited jouissance that obeys the discrete structure of the signifier, phallic jouissance is always at fault and prepared to entertain the superego’s imperative: “always more.”

HYSTERIA AND FEMININITY

In this context the hysteric’s question about sex can but change in form, to the point of becoming, as we know, unrecognizable to psychiatry in its current state. But under the pretext of not overlooking hysteria, psychoanalysis should not see it everywhere by simply confusing it with femininity. Lacan always distinguished the two positions, specifying that hysteria is not the privilege of women alone: there also are hysterical men, and they may even be more hysterical than women! If this is the case, it is necessary to understand what causes the confusion.

I would like to highlight a shift in the feminine problematic between Freud and Lacan. Taking as his point of departure his discovery of the phallic phase, which reveals the single signifier that answers for sexual difference in the unconscious, Freud distinguished the two sexes by having: one has it, and the other does not have it. The one that has it fears losing it, and the one that does not have it wants to acquire it. Lacan translates this nicely when he speaks of “the threat of or nostalgia based on not-having” (*Écrits*, 694/289).⁶ Thus we find, on the one hand, a defensive strategy of protection and, on the other hand, several possible strategies. Freud sketched out the range of women’s

different positions.⁷ One position consists of completely eliding sex. A second position, a combative one, denies the phallic lack in the hope of acquiring a substitute: this is what he calls the “masculinity complex.” The third position involves consent and renunciation, out of love for the father, Freud thinks, and hope for a compensatory child. It also is a position of waiting, but it requires the mediation of a man to give the phallic substitute in the form of love or the child as a gift. Thus, according to Freud, the true woman is the one who—accepting her deprivation—also is willing to say “thank you,” while the other—the woman with a masculinity complex who sets out to acquire a phallic substitute by herself—refuses it with a “no thank you” that virtually rejects men as useless.

Unlike Freud, Lacan first emphasizes the dimension of being, or rather the failure to be [*manque-à-être*] which, as an effect of speech, is the point of departure for both men and women. In the question of sexual difference, the problematic of having is combined with that of being. We can trace the variations on these two interwoven themes through the different texts. They lead Lacan to distinguish men and women a little differently than Freud, though in the end Lacan does not contest Freud’s phallocentrism. Men, if they are posited as having the phallus, make up for their failure to be by having and by the advantage [*bénéfice*]⁸ of phallic jouissance. Women, on the contrary, conjugate their failure to be at the outset with deprivation of the organ. But according to Lacan, this lack—which is, as it were, doubled—opens the way for her to a solution that consists in deriving a being-effect from her relationship with a man. Hence the possible formulation of sexual difference through the opposition between having and being: having or being the phallus in his earlier work (*Écrits*, 630–33/265–69), and having or being the symptom in his later work. The two formulations are not equivalent: since the phallus is a negative function of lack, and the symptom is a positive function of jouissance, they are opposed, so much so that wanting “to be the phallus,” with which Lacan at one point stigmatized the hysteric, means precisely not wanting to be the symptom.

Let me simply refer here to Lacan’s second 1979 lecture on Joyce;⁹ there Lacan explicitly distinguishes the hysteric’s position from the woman’s position. A woman is specified as being a symptom. This is not the case of the hysteric, who is characterized as “being interested in the other’s symptom” and is therefore not the last symptom but only “second to last.” To be the unique symptom at least for One is not, strictly speaking, the hysteric’s demand, as we know from Dora. We see this in analytic experience in the following way: even in private, the hysterical subject does not constitute a couple, but at least a triangle, if not a still larger configuration. The clinical difficulty is that the inverse is not true. A woman, whether she is obsessive, phobic, or even psychotic, might also have to deal with what I would call her “symptom rivals,” but those rivals would not play the same role for her as that played by the other woman in hysteria. Note that an obsessive man also has his triangle when he sustains his desire through that of an alter ego.

For a hysteric, in any case, being interested in the other's symptom means not consenting to being the symptom, and it does not mean having a symptom identical to a man's symptom. Contrary to what hasty thinkers imagine, the fact that someone is not a woman does not mean that person is a man. For example, Lacan says that Socrates is not a man: instead, he occupies a third position, that of having a symptom vicariously through a man [*par la procuration d'un homme*], so to speak, and that, Lacan clarifies, does not imply bodily contact.

One could catalog all of the formulations in Lacan's teachings by which he progressively approached this assertion. First come the statements that indicate the hysteric's refusal or impossibility to accept herself as an object. It would be necessary to add to the list the notion of "slipping away" (*Écrits*, 824/321), which indicates the strategy by which the subject extricates herself from the *a*-sexual jouissance (Seminar XX, 13/6, 115/127) of the relationship between the sexes, as well as Lacan's formulations regarding hysterical identification with desire's lack as opposed to desire's object. It is clear, for example, that Dora is interested in Frau K. as a symptom but does not want to be Frau K.—consider the slap she gives Herr K. when he offers her the position. The butcher's wife, with her dream of defiance toward Freud (SE IV, 147), shows more clearly still—since she puts up in reality with the assiduous attentions of her husband, the man with the organ—that she dreams of nothing more than of leaving the place of the symptom and, as Lacan says in Seminar XVII (84–85), of leaving the dear butcher to another woman. As for Socrates, it is clear that he does not want to be Alcibiades' symptom, but that he is interested in Agathon insofar as Agathon occupies that place for Alcibiades.

We see here why the hysteric's position often is confused with the feminine position. To be a woman implies having a relationship with the Other, man, in order to be actualized as a symptom. Since her jouissance being involves the mediation of this Other, we understand her interest, not so much in that Other, man or God, as in his desire—the desire by means of which she comes to incarnate his jouissance. Now the hysteric submits to the same mediation by the Other but with different ends in view—not in order to be actualized as his symptom. Her desire is sustained by the Other's symptom, to the extent that one could almost say that she makes herself a cause thereof, but a cause of . . . knowledge, not because she is motivated by a desire to know, but because she would like to inspire a desire to know in the Other.

How, then, are we to situate the fact that the hysteric "plays the part of the man" [*faire l'homme*]?¹⁰ This expression takes on several meanings. It designates first the hysteric's challenge: "show me if you are a man," in the sense of "stand up and fight like a man," but it also means identification with the man. However, this is not just any old identification, and this is where people often are mistaken. It can be an identification with his phallic knowledge or, on the contrary, with his lack thereof. Both can actually coexist in the same subject, but hysterical identification proper, as we find it in Dora and in the butcher's wife

(as Lacan reformulates the latter's case in 1973),¹¹ implies identifying with a man insofar as he is not fulfilled, insofar as he too is unsatisfied, his jouissance castrated.

The clinician can easily be led astray here, for the consequences of this identification sometimes present themselves in the form of a hyper-femininity. Consider the butcher's wife: at the imaginary, visible level, she competes with her female friend in playing the part of the woman, but this masquerade results from the fact that, at the symbolic level, as a subject, she identifies with her husband insofar as he is lacking something. Another practical result is that the hysteric becomes the active agent of the Other's castration.

TODAY AND TOMORROW

Having clarified this position, I now return to contemporary forms of hysteria. The state of our civilization is, as I said, complicit with the ever-possible identification of women with masculine having. Thanks to metonymy, a career path is open to all women, to our modern hysterics as well as to others, and they are quite talented in their pursuits. But one should nevertheless recall the clinical result that analysis attests to in all of its forms: contrary to what one often imagines, the more the hysteric succeeds in the phallic conquest, the less she can enjoy it, and the greater her sense of "disappropriation" grows. She can strive to win the different competitions open to her, but almost as soon as she has proven herself, the gain vanishes—for her real question is played out elsewhere, in the closed field, as Lacan says, of the sexual relationship. It is only there that sexual difference, repressed in all other facets of life by unisex, remains irreducible. We could perhaps say that she makes the unisex of castration rule there, too, but this is because she is only interested in the jouissance that is its correlate and that she exalts. On this point, the sexual subversion of our times owes as much to her as to science.

In this respect, psychoanalysis is really what the hysteric needed, because it agrees to recognize the enigma of sex and assumes responsibility for it. Consider the difference between psychoanalysis and Charcot's approach: Charcot thought—somewhat stupidly—that what a hysteric needed was an expert love maker. This is what is implied in the formulation that struck Freud so much, which prescribed repeated doses of the penis as a remedy for all of the ills of hysterics.¹² One hears the same thing in the lewd slang expression that a woman is "not getting the right stuff" [*mal baisée*].¹³ This expression is, in fact, less shocking than simply poorly thought out. What the hysteric is seeking is not an expert love maker—someone who makes love well—but a sex connoisseur, someone who can say what jouissance it is that a woman has [*porte*] beyond that of the organ. If the one she has is not spoken, one can only mark its place by leaving the organ-related jouissance unsatisfied.

The faithlessness of the hysteric has a logic of its own (*Écrits*, 824/321). Freud accepted the challenge and invented an approach that excludes the

expert love maker by forbidding bodily contact, thus obliging the subject to get the Other to respond and to produce knowledge such as that of science, in which logic plays a major role. Actually, psychoanalysis did satisfy the hysteric's request for knowledge about sex. This knowledge, however, is a surprise knowledge with respect to the aspiration that gave rise to it, for it consists only of a "structural negativity"—to use Lacan's expression—and thus leaves the hysteric's wish unsatisfied. Instead of the unconscious yielding a science of jouissance as sexual jouissance, it turns out that the unconscious is only familiar with phallic jouissance, which is *a*-sexual; the unconscious only approaches the other jouissance through logic and the real of that jouissance through what it is impossible to say.

It is hard to say whether hysterics would be happy with such an arid answer. Would they not rather be tempted to inspire a resurgence of religion? Lacan worried about that, but it must be said that a certain part of analytic revelation also lends itself to that, since psychoanalysis emphasizes, with respect to jouissance, that castration is not the last word for everyone; not only is there surplus jouissance that plugs it up, but there also is the Other jouissance that objects to unisex. The analysand no doubt consumes phallic jouissance, but the analyst incarnates what remains irreducible to phallic jouissance.

It is quite apparent that this irreducible element lends itself to diverse uses that are subjective. In particular, woman's supplementary jouissance, newly accredited as a limit of knowledge by Lacan and the logic he adopts, this new alliance with Tiresias, is already engendering new clinical facts in analytic discourse: a question, no doubt, but also a craving [*envie*]. This craving—if it is not new, then it is at least newly deployed—rivaling penis envy, is a craving for the other jouissance; it is a fear as well, or even a denunciation. We can find traces of it in both men and women and isolate its amusing use, designed to renew the resources of the masquerade that makes woman what she is. The cult of her mystery could very well make her exist, as it made God, the Father, exist.

In conclusion, our scientific civilization and the universalization it promotes engender unisex. In this context hysterics have inspired psychoanalysis, which keeps open the question of sex and provides them with a response. But in the future they might well reject its purely logical response and prefer instead the religion of woman. That will depend on whether or not hysterical discourse yields to analytic discourse.

Translated by François Raffoul and David Pettigrew,
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NOTES

1. *Le Séminaire, Livre XVII, L'envers de la psychanalyse* (1969–1970), ed. J.-A. Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991); "Radiophonie," *Scilicet* 2/3 (1970): 55–99. All footnotes as well as references in the text have been added by the editor.

2. The French here plays on the contrast in French economic terminology between capital (fixed assets) and the usufruct (the enjoyment or *jouissance*) of that capital.

3. A sort of map of the landscape of love (the “tender” feelings), described by Madelaine de Scudéry.

4. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press), vol. XI, “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love,” 179–90. Hereafter, all references to the *Standard Edition* will be given as SE, followed by volume and page numbers.

5. “Unisex” is used here and elsewhere in this chapter as a noun, such as “masculinity” or “femininity.”

6. All references to *Écrits* here are first to the French edition (Paris: Seuil, 1966) and then to English translation, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), although all translations have been modified.

7. See “Female Sexuality,” SE XXI, 229–30 and “Femininity,” SE XXII, 126–30.

8. The French here also means gain or profit.

9. “Joyce le symptôme II,” in *Joyce avec Lacan*, eds. J. Aubert & M. Jolas (Paris: Navarin, 1987).

10. The French here can also mean to make a man, that is, to make a man of someone.

11. “Introduction à l’édition allemande d’un premier volume des *Écrits* (Walter Verlag),” *Scilicet* 5 (1975): 11–17.

12. Cf. “Rx Penis normalis dosim repetatur,” in SE XIV, 15, where the “prescription” is attributed to Chrobak.

13. American English does not seem to have any exact equivalent for this French expression, which literally means “badly laid.”

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